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A REPLY TO DENZIN

I have been asked to make my remarks as brief as possible in the interests of preserving space, so I will respond to what I regard the more important of Professor Denzin's arguments in essentially the order that he presented them. Professor Denzin is certainly correct that his position is radically at odds with my own. He contends that any research method is justified so long as it is designed to advance scientific knowledge and does not willfully harm human subjects. This principle, I take it, would admit to the roster of legitimate research techniques not only such practices as disguised observation, but the use of wire-tapping and eaves-dropping devices of one sort or another, and all the rest of the contrivances that come from the new technology of espionage. I suspect that most sociologists—perhaps even Professor Denzin—would prefer to draw a line somewhere short of this. If so, the main point at issue here is not whether sociologists should respect some limits in their search for data but whether the deliberate use of masks falls inside or outside that line.

My objections to disguised observation are based on a broader set of considerations than are mentioned in Denzin's review. I feel that sociologists should not invade the privacy of other persons, no matter how genial their intentions or how impressive their scientific credentials, because the practice is damaging both to the climate of a free society and to the integrity of the profession that permits it. Now this is largely a personal reflection and I cannot see much point in arguing about it. But even if I agreed with Denzin that the case should rest with the subjects themselves, I would still have serious reservations about disguised observation. This is because I do not think that Denzin or I or anyone else really *knows* when we are harming other people; and, so long as this continues to be the case, it seems to me that we have no right to let others take the risks for projects that happen to mean something to us without first obtaining their informed consent. I am not at all sure that I know what "informed consent" is, but it is evident that disguised observation does not fit under the heading.

I made four general points in my original article and Professor Denzin has discussed them in order. Regarding the first, I agree that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish

between "private" and "public" settings in any objective fashion, but I propose the following rule of thumb: whenever an investigator goes to all the trouble of disguising his own identity and introducing himself as someone he knows he is not in order to enter a social sphere to which he is not otherwise eligible, then it is fair to infer (a) that *he*, at least, defines that sphere as private, and (b) that he expects others in that situation to define it similarly. Moreover, I think it is simply not true that "no mask is any more real than any other," and in this assertion I would claim to be a student of Goffman's too. Every man plays many parts, to be sure; but every sane and moral man knows that certain roles in the repertory of his culture are proper for him to play while others are not, and it seems to me that we are completely forgetting what we know about the nature of human personality and the development of social selves if we view the matter as flatly as Denzin suggests. It is one thing for he and I to shift social gears as we move in a reasonably defined orbit from the office to the classroom and out into the field, but it is quite another thing for us to emulate those of our colleagues who join a group of alcoholics dressed in clothes picked out of a garbage can or who impersonate enlisted men while receiving the pay and privileges of officers. The elaborate disguises that most employers of the method have devised in order to "pose" (their word) as someone they are not should be testimony enough to the fact that they are aware of the difference; and, if this is not persuasive, we need only consider what would happen if an unlicensed stranger were to appear in a professional gathering and present himself as an instructor of sociology. We might denounce it as a fraud, diagnose it as a delusion, or pass it off as a prank, but few of us would experience any difficulty determining whether the mask was real or not.

As for the second point, Professor Denzin offers a compelling argument and I will yield. It is of course true that other forms of sociological research have a potential for closing doors to future investigation. I happen to feel that the risks here are considerably greater, but Denzin is correct to suppose that this estimate is based as much on conviction as it is on information.

As for the third point, it may be that Denzin has me there, too. I have no particularly good reasons to insist that students are more compromised while engaged in undercover observation than they are, say, when confronting irate housewives during a door-to-door survey. Granting this, I am left the choice either of arguing that students should be protected from this latter practice as well, or of withdrawing as gracefully as possible. I think a strong case might be made for the first of these options, but instead I will retreat to the second—noting only that my original intention was to point out the incongruities one sees in the arguments of sociologists who discuss the moral ambiguities of disguised observation and then send students out to do the work.

The fourth point is in many ways the critical one, and here I suspect that Professor Denzin has confused the kind of undercover work I was discussing in my paper with other forms of small group research. He contends that we could measure the effect that disguised observation has on subjects by following up the attempt with such methods as post-observational inquiry and the like. Now I think it is reasonable to assume that researchers wear masks primarily when they cannot show their faces, and I cannot imagine why people who will not respond to a more open kind of investigation in the first instance should submit to a few cheerful rounds of interviewing in the second. People who have seen their trust violated, their privacy invaded, their personal worlds exposed, are not likely to be the most cooperative or reliable informants—unless, of course, Denzin is proposing that a second wave of observers should dress in costumes and follow the first, in which case all the objections I raised earlier are simply doubled. I agree that some empirical evidence would be valuable here: my problem is that no one to date has come up with any and I doubt very much that anyone ever will. The conditions that prompt investigators to wear disguises are almost always conditions that discourage any reasonable hope of measuring the disruptive influence of the observer.

The fact that the position I recommend limits our field of observation to volunteers

is, I agree, something of an inconvenience; but any ethical stance is a limitation on one's freedom of movement and I cannot see that this is a reasonable objection. From a purely scientific point of view, after all, it is also an inconvenience that physicians cannot experiment on the persons of patients. The presumption in our society has always been that some things are more important than the needs of researchers.

In this connection, Denzin is concerned that sociologists do not enjoy the license to "gain entry into any research setting" and proposes that this privilege be extended to us. What he fails to appreciate is that none of the professions he lists enjoy this license *when they are engaged in research*, but only when they are serving the interests of clients. If we were to find ourselves dealing only with volunteers, we would certainly be limiting our terrain; but we would then be in exactly the same position as those physicians and lawyers whose status Professor Denzin is so anxious for us to share. The only investigators I can think of who enjoy privileges when engaged in the business of gathering information for their own professional purposes are policemen and espionage agents, and I doubt very much that any of us would like to operate with the general level of trust and respect that they command.

In short, my main disagreement with Professor Denzin is his assumption—stated implicitly, at least—that what is good for sociology is inherently ethical. His "value position," as he informs us near the end of his remarks, is that researchers "who have assumed those research roles and strategies . . . have contributed more substantive knowledge . . . than have those who assumed more open roles." I do not think that this is true by any means, but, even if it were, it would not strike me as the firmest moral ground on which to build a professional ethic. Surely the case should be decided on other merits.

I do not know whether Denzin is in the minority or not, as he seems to feel; but he has stated his case with refreshing candor and I admire his willingness to join the discussion in so straightforward a fashion.

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